



Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Based Youth Counselling in Zimbabwe: Benefits, Challenges, and Ethical Issues

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Abstract: The study sought to assess the effectiveness of information and communication technology (ICT) based youths counselling in Zimbabwe. The study aimed at identifying the platforms used in ICT based youth counselling, exploring the advantages and disadvantages of ICT based youth counselling and examining the ethical issues surrounding this phenomenon. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach where qualitative and quantitative data were triangulated and an exploratory case study design was employed. Focus group discussions, structured questionnaires and one to one interviews were used to get data from a sample of 142 participants. The study found that social media platforms such as Whatsapp, Facebook, Short Message Service, and voice calls were used to administer ICT based youth counselling in Zimbabwe. These come with the pros of being cheap, convenient and they offer user anonymity. Youths prefer using Whatsapp more to other platforms. ICT's, reliance on mobile network provision and electricity is a major drawback to this kind of counselling. Ethical issues such as competency and confidentiality apply to ICT based youths counselling. Overall, ICT based counselling was found to be very effective in administering youth counselling. It is therefore recommended that the education curriculum for counsellors should include ICT based counselling and professional bodies for counsellors should consider ethical issues involved in ICT based counselling.

Keywords: ICT, Youth Counselling, counselling ethics, helpline, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Counselling is a phenomenon that has been a part of human life since time immemorial. Youths need to be guided in their relationships with the environment and health, knowledge, learning skills and attitudes that lead to failure and success in life. Effective counselling must aid in improving the self-perception of young people and enable achievement of life tasks. Counselling should empower youths to partake fully in, and profit from the social and economic development of the society (Gordon, 2011).

Prior to British colonization, counselling was practised as art in Zimbabwe (Shizha and Charema, 2008). There were various forms of counselling, chief among these, giving advice and sharing wisdom. Traditional healers, spiritual leaders, and elders provided guidance and advice to community members in individual, family and group contexts (Mabvurira, 2016). During the colonial era, the colonialists brought with them their version of counselling psychology and they established a Department of Psychology at the then University of Rhodesia (Richards and Vigano, 2012). Counselling was thus professionalised and institutionalised. In modern-day Zimbabwe, counselling services are offered at the Department of Social Services, various hospitals, churches and non-governmental organisations (Shizha and Charema, 2008). Some families still seek counselling services from other family members such as aunties or uncles. The practice is however fast disappearing due wearing of the extended family system mainly as a result of globalisation and urbanisation.

Due to modernisation and advancement in technology, some organisations are venturing into the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) when offering counselling services. With the coming of globalization and advancement in technology, youth counselling in the country is slowly adopting the face of technology. The study sought to assess the effectiveness of ICT based counselling of youths in Zimbabwe. The aim was achieved through four objectives; to identify ICT platforms used in counselling of youths, to explore advantages of using ICT in counselling of youths, to examine challenges associated with ICT based youth counselling and to explore ethical issues associated with the use of ICT in youth counselling.

The study was premised on the instrumental theory of technology. The instrumental theory has its origins in the ideas of Andrew Feenberg. The theory is rooted in the view that technologies are 'tools' standing ready to aid the resolution of their users (Feenberg, 2002). The instrumentalist view of technology is chiefly prominent in the social sciences. It accounts for the strain between efficiency, tradition, and ideology which ascend from socio-technical change. Technology is deemed neutral without evaluative content of its own. The concept of technology neutrality can be explained in four ways: (i) technology as pure instrumentality is indifferent to the variety of ends it can be employed to achieve any purpose (ii) technology appears to be indifferent to existing power structures (iii) the socio-political neutrality of technology is usually attributed to its 'rational' character and the universality of truth it embodies (iv) universality of technology means same standards of measurements can be applied in different settings.



2.0 Theoretical Debate

Youth counselling is a term used to describe both counselling and psychotherapeutic support to assist children and young people to address and overcome developmental challenges, psychological obstacles, and traumatic life experiences- promoting self-belief, enhancing self-insight and building resilience (COSCA, 2004). With only a small percentage of youth seeking help through traditional channels, there is need to develop innovative interventions which target youths and prevent their problems from escalating into adulthood (Manion, 2010; Glasheen *et al*, 2013). Usually the period of being a youth is characterised by confusion, identity crisis, rebellion and self-doubt as argued by Erikson's (1956) stages of social-emotional development. In this regard, there is a need for innovative interventions targeting youths to be youth-friendly and be able to address these concerns. Using ICT in youths counselling may fit perfectly well in these criteria.

According to Cuez and Allen (1999), effective counselling should help improve the self-image of young people and facilitate achievement in life tasks. These goals cannot be achieved if the seeking of professional help results in the stigmatisation of the client or receipt of judgment by the service providers and the society at large. Burns *et al.*, (2009) argue that at the individual level, stigma is a significant barrier preventing people from seeking help. There is, therefore, an urgent need for inexpensive and feasible interventions for youths. Larion (2014) is of the view that the use of ICT in counselling reduces stigma and increases treatment availability.

Manion (2010) argues that service gaps exist which interfere with the ability of traditional counselling systems to meet the complex and comorbid needs of youths and there is a lack of standardization of best practices and lack of integration of evidence-based practice. Counsellors tend to take a parentage role when counselling youths especially on issues surrounding sexual reproductive health. This sentiment is further cemented by Gama (2009) who states that health providers are cultural agents who manage diverse roles both as 'moral guardians' and as 'health providers. In a way, this limits their effectiveness as counsellors. These disparities in service provision create reluctance in youths to seek counseling services in the form of various types of traditional counselling. Use of ICT in counselling of youths, therefore, becomes a solution which treats each client as individuals, embracing modernisation and not strongly rooted in the concept of culture. ICT based counselling does not force a client to reveal their age or name during the counselling session thus there is an avoidance of treating clients as mere cases, not individuals (Jacob, 2016).

While the use of ICT has increased certain problems like cyberbullying, it does have value for mental health, prevention, and intervention with youth reporting that they feel empowered when they access ICT based youth counselling at the tips of their fingers (Larion, 2014).

COSCA (2004) is of the view that the internet is a familiar and therefore safe environment for young people. Larion (2014) further states that clinicians' earlier opinions were also positive, indicating being more focused and being able to generate powerful responses upon reflecting on their clients' written responses. Mallen and Vogel (2005) state that adolescents have more power in technology-mediated counselling as compared to face to face counselling in light of the control they have. For example, they have control over session length and timing in the sense that they can just disconnect a phone call, go offline on WhatsApp or stop texting when it suits them.

Flores (2012) argues that distance counselling reaches clients who may not have the time or capability to seek face to face counselling and a good example is that of clients who are hard of hearing. Use of ICT components such as mobile phone calls, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, therefore, become effective tools in providing services to hard to reach clients. Hoffmann (2006) argues that perhaps the greatest advantage of using ICT in counselling is the access it affords, reaching in remote areas or into the households of those incapable of leaving them. Use of ICT in counselling has the potential to reach populations in rural and underdeveloped areas countrywide (Mallen and Vogel, 2005). In most rural districts of Zimbabwe, clients have to travel over a long distance in order to be able to access the nearest Department of Social Services where free counselling is offered face to face. More often than not this is hampered by structural barriers such as transport costs and time barriers (Boydell *et al*, 2005) as the youths are expected to help with household chores such as fetching water and firewood. ICT is thus used to fill the service gaps inherent in remote and rural areas. For example, no matter the location, youths needing counselling services just have to send a call me back which is free of charge to a helpline and they are immediately called back by professional counsellors.

Richards and Vigano (2012) are of the view that the use of ICT in counselling, together with the benefit of writing in counselling has been shown to be a powerful therapeutic tool for university students. Most of these students are youths. Writing enables both the client and therapist to put their emotion in the counselling sessions and also makes a provision for well thought out answers on the part of the counsellor. This is especially possible on platforms like WhatsApp and short message services. Well thought out emotions, infused with emotion from the counsellor will prove to be therapeutic to the youth client as he or she will feel that the counsellor is well invested in helping them overcome their problem.

An inherent disadvantage in using ICT for youths counselling is that sometimes technology fails, technical issues arise (Marion, 2014). Martilla (2011) argues that the dependency on technology, network coverage, and electricity supply mean that mobile technology cannot be used everywhere and every time. Most remote areas in Zimbabwe have poor network coverage. This means that if there is no network coverage, an average youth in these areas cannot access ICT counselling services as they require one to have a



working mobile network and access to electricity. The use of mobile technologies is not available or affordable for most youths in low-income sub-Saharan African countries (Martilla, 2009). This results in ICT counselling services being inaccessible to the rural youth. However, Gambanga (2014) counters this argument by revealing that at least 84% of rural households are in possession of at least one mobile phone. Youth does not need to own mobile phone to be able to access ICT counselling services. Borrowing or renting out is a common practice in Africa and other developing regions. Mallen and Vogel (2005) also argue that there is a lack of online counsellor training occurring in clinical and mental health programs. There is a need to ensure post-graduate and graduate distance counselling training programs offer and ensure competent and ethical ICT counselling services. With respect to text-based online counselling, one of the major concerns is whether a sufficient client counsellor relationship can be developed without verbal and visual cues (Glasheen *et al*, 2013). Misunderstanding, particularly in identifying emotion can also be more common without verbal and visual cues. In addition, an exchange is much slower when using text-based communication, therefore, time constraints may limit effective counselling processes (Yin, 2014). Cuez and Allen (1999) argue that it is important to note that online support is inappropriate for some client groups, for example, suicidal or psychotic clients. In addition, text-based interventions may be better suited to those with higher levels of computer literacy and written expression skills. Though a number of studies have been carried out on ICT based youth counselling, none known to the researchers have interrogated the phenomenon in urban Zimbabwe.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach. Mixed methods allow for convergence to integrate the quantitative and qualitative data (Cresswell, 2009). In this regard, the mixed methodology was used in understanding of how ICT based youths counselling is effective in delivering psychosocial support to youths. The overall strategy of the study was sequential exploratory with the qualitative investigation taking place first in phase one of the study and the quantitative investigation in phase two. The study adopted an exploratory case study design.

3.2 Target population and sampling

Data were collected from clients of youth-led non-profit making organisation which uses various technologies like voice calls, WhatsApp and text messages in youths counselling. The organisation is located in Chitungwiza, an urban area approximately 30 kilometres from Harare, Zimbabwe's capital. The study targeted 1400 youths aged between 18 and 20 years who had accessed the services offered by the organisation in the year preceding the date of data collection. The organisation has 3 main youth WhatsApp support groups for young people living with HIV, peer educators and young women who have been offered economic strengthening programs by the organisation. Databases for every young person who accesses the

organisation's services are updated daily and these are used to send bulk text messages with information relevant to each client. The study also targeted professional counsellors employed by the organisation.

A sample of 40 youths participated in 4 different focus group discussions of 10 members each while 100 responded to questionnaires. Simple random sampling was used to identify the 140 youths who participated in the study. A rule of thumb of 10% of the target population was used to determine sample size (Babbie and Mouton, 2005). Two youth counsellors in the organisation also participated in the study.

3.3 Data Analysis

Zimuto (2013) argues that data analysis is very important in validating academic arguments as it brings out evidence that a certain phenomenon exists. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis while quantitative data in the form of descriptive statistics were analysed using excel spreadsheets.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are very crucial to research. Ethics help in determining the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours when conducting research (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). In short, they are the do's and don'ts that a researcher ought to follow during research. A number of research ethics were observed during the data collection process. Informed consent was taken into consideration. It involves telling the participants about the general nature of the study and assures them of confidentiality (Besley, 2002). The researchers made sure that the participants were adequately informed about the research's aims and objectives. Informed consent forms were given to the participants before they took part in the research. Participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research should they wish to do so. The anonymity and privacy of researchers were respected. Pseudo names were used in the research if there was a need for reference. Research participants with easily distinguishable individualities or positions within the organisation under study were reminded that it may be difficult to disguise their identity totally without twisting the data collected.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Platforms used in counselling of youths

Youths who participated in the study used WhatsApp, Facebook, text messages and voice calls to access counselling services. The study revealed that 42% of youths who utilize ICT based counselling prefer using messages on WhatsApp when seeking counselling. Facebook and SMS were used by 17% each and the remaining 25% relied on voice calls and sending call me back messages to a helpline so as to receive voice call counselling. In a related study, Francis-Smith (2017) found Whatsapp to be the most popular ICT platform used in counselling. He notes that Whatsapp platform as a free online platform which offers the option to



have free secure instant messaging, voice and video calls and the ability to transfer a different kind of files.

4.1.1 WhatsApp

The study revealed that 28% of the respondents who used Whatsapp platform used it at least once a week while 31% reported that they sometimes use Whatsapp. Most regular youths Whatsapp users prefer to use the platform for counselling because it is cheap. This was confirmed by youths who said:

“It is cheaper, easy to use and the responses are quicker.”

“Life in Zimbabwe is getting tough every day and WhatsApp becomes the cheapest option”.

The average person used US\$1 to access WhatsApp per week, which was very affordable for most youths. In addition, WhatsApp offers an end to end encryption of messages, thus claiming that client data is not kept on their servers or recorded unless if the client instigates the command. This feature gives youths the assurance that their messages are safe and there is no way that they will wake up one day to find their stories leaked onto the Internet where anyone can see. However, there is reduced anonymity in the sense that the counsellor will be able to view the client's profile photos of themselves thus making the aspect of ICT based youths counselling offering anonymity as being overrated.

4.1.2 Facebook

The study revealed that 17% of the participants sometimes used Facebook for counselling purposes and of these 22 % confirmed using the platform all the time. Dean (2018) refers to Facebook as a popular free social networking website which allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and videos, send messages and interact in groups. This platform is not very popular with Zimbabwean youths in terms of accessing counselling services. This is because the bulk of the youths prefer using WhatsApp to Facebook when it comes to important communications. This was echoed by a youth participant who said:

“I only use Facebook counselling when I need basic information which anyone can provide or check what is written on the helpline page”

The two counsellors who participated in the study reported that the Youth Helpline Facebook page frequently uploads information on issues affecting youths. Most youths who use Facebook thus log on to the page in order to access this information. They further reported that youths are hesitant to use Facebook for one on one counselling sessions for fear of being hacked as most of them share passwords with friends and lovers. They therefore rather prefer to access informational counselling on Facebook and other forms of counselling on other 'secure' platforms. It can, therefore, be noted that despite being good for sharing information,

Facebook accounts are at high risk of being hacked compared to other platforms like Whatsapp.

4.1.3 Short Message Service

The platform allows users to send messages of usually not more than 160 characters per message to each other. A look at the Youth Helpline Database shows that very few youths use SMSs to access counselling services. The study revealed that of the 17% of youths who use SMSs, 33% used SMS at least once a week. The participants reported that SMSs are more expensive to use than WhatsApp or Facebook. The youths mostly use this platform when other platforms are not available. One youth indicated that:

“I use text messages because my phone does not have WhatsApp”.

This response shows that youths only use the SMS platform as an alternative to Whatsapp when the platform is inaccessible not because they prefer using it. Another factor might be that other platforms like Facebook and Whatsapp allow for users to post their pictures, interact with other group members, see whether the other person is either offline or online which the youths might find fascinating. In addition, responses are much slower thus most users might end up losing patience. If the network is poor, some messages might not be delivered to the intended recipient thus the counselling session loses its consistency.

4.1.4 Use of voice calls

One of the two counsellors who participated in the study indicated that the organisation's helpline makes about 35 phone calls per day in response to call me back messages that are sent to the system. According to the study, 25% of the respondents use the platform and of these, 12 percent use the platform once a week. The study revealed that most of the youths who use the voice call platform are from the rural areas who do not own advanced mobile phones which can connect to the internet or there is poor network reception and they can therefore not use platforms such as Whatsapp and Facebook.

One of the youths stated that:

“I prefer using calls when accessing counselling services because only then am I guaranteed of security when it comes to my identity because they cannot see my photo or copy and paste my messages”.

Respondents believe there is anonymity that comes with the use of voice calls for counselling purposes. There is no danger of having their chats exposed by falling into the hands of the wrong person. However, anonymity can still be breached if the calls are recorded without the client being aware. There is, therefore, need for counsellors to award the clients the right of informed consent so that they are aware that their calls are being recorded for purposes of case progression.



4.2 Advantages of using ICT based youths counselling

The participants cited a number of advantages associated with ICT based counselling.

4.2.1 Convenience

The study revealed that most youths choose ICT based counselling over face to face counselling because of its convenient nature. One counsellor at the organisation stated that:

“ICT based youths counselling is convenient for young people as they can access it from anywhere including in the comfort of their homes.”

Another female youth said:

“I love ICT based youths counselling because it is easy to access, simple as that”.

ICT based youths counselling becomes handy for those youths who cannot travel to the nearest counselling centre especially in rural Zimbabwe where some of the youths stay far away from utility services. The study also showed that most of the youths simply do not have time to visit counselling centres so as to receive counselling. This is because most of them will be too busy at work or at school usually from eight o'clock in the morning up to five o'clock in the evening. Most schools in Zimbabwean high and middle-density suburbs do not have professional counsellors. By the time they want to access face to face counseling facilities, they will be closed and most of them do not open during the weekends where most of the youths will be free as well. ICT based youths counselling is thus a necessary tool for delivering counselling. This is supported by Flores (2012) who argues that ICT based counselling reaches out to clients who may not have the time or capacity for face to face counselling. This includes those youths who are hard of hearing or physically impaired which minimises travelling. Youths also preferred ICT based counselling because unlike in face to face counselling they are the ones who control the session. One female youth reported that:

“I enjoy the power that accessing counselling on WhatsApp affords me. I choose when I want to talk to the counsellor and when I do not. I can just quit the session if the heat becomes too much and continue it when I feel that it is now ok unlike in face to face counselling where I'm forced to sit through it all”.

This finding is supported by Francis-Smith (2017) who argues that being in control is one of the priorities adolescents seek during therapy. This is accurately captured by the above respondent. This aspect of being in control enables the counselling sessions to progress to the main goal of counselling which is a cure as the client is willing enough to participate in the sessions given that they are doing it according to their own free will.

4.2.2 Anonymity

The research found that during administering ICT based youths counselling the Youth Helpline does not require the identity of the client. Instead, the counsellors and the system

are concerned about the client's age and area of residence. Youths are thus assured that they can be helped to absolve any issues requiring counselling which they might have whilst keeping their identities a mystery. This reduces instances of stigma and discrimination associated with help-seeking behaviour. Youths' self-image and achievement of life tasks are then facilitated and improved (Cuez and Allen, 1999). Clients are only asked to present their credentials if there is any need for referrals. One of the youth respondents was recorded saying:

“I can't handle the face to face counselling sessions. I'm kind of shy so it was easier saying it without seeing the person's face and reactions”.

Another one also echoed the same opinions when he said:

“I am afraid of being judged by the counsellor during face to face counselling so it is much easier to hide my identity if I am on an ICT platform”.

Most youths are concerned about keeping their personalities angelic before their families, friends, church members and the society at large. ICT based counselling gives them the platform to freely reveal their 'dark' selves during therapy whilst still maintaining their good image to society. Anonymity is important as it gives the youths confidence to open up to the online counsellor knowing that their identity is secured. They may disclose all the information they may sometimes fail to disclose during face to face sessions.

4.2.3 Affordability

The study found out that youths favour using ICT based counselling because it is cheaper than other available options. Boydell *et al.* (2014) argue that transport costs and time restrictions are a barrier to youths accessing counselling services. When accessing ICT based youths counselling, transport fares do not apply thus money is saved. One male youth participant stated that:

“I prefer using ICT based counselling because besides giving me anonymity it is very affordable for someone of my stature. I am a student and I don't have any income for me to be able to get transport fare to travel to far away counselling centres which assure me some privacy”.

When accessing counselling through voice calls, clients just have to send a free call me back message or better still dial the toll-free number, 393 which is available for Econet users. When on Wi-Fi networks, youths can freely access counseling on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. Even when using a data plan, one can access these platforms for as little as 33 cents per day thus youths are very comfortable with ICT based youths counselling. ICT counselling, therefore, proves to be very convenient for youths in terms of costs as most of them are unemployed.



4.3 Challenges associated with ICT based youths counselling

4.3.1 Network problems

The study unearthed that poor mobile network connections are a hindrance to ICT based youths counselling. Poor mobile network results in a lack of coherence during an ICT based counselling session. This is because some messages get lost during the transition from one mobile server to another if the network connection is poor. This misnomer is common with SMSs. One respondent who uses SMS mediated counselling commented that:

“It is so frustrating when during a chat with the counsellor, and suddenly a text message comes in with two stars - asterisks- and a message in between written in bold, some text missing”

Another respondent also echoed the same sentiment:

“Imagine the disappointment when you are eagerly waiting for the message from your counsellor, you get excited when you see that the counsellor is typing a message on WhatsApp and instead of you seeing the message it does not show and instead reads, ‘Waiting for this message’.”

This results in slow responses thus sessions drag on and on for long stretches of time. In this regard, counselling becomes inconsistent and less effective as it will become difficult for the counsellor to establish rapport with the client.

Network problems are also rampant in the most rural remote parts of the country as these areas are less developed than the more geographically accessible ones. One of the counsellors stated that:

“One young person might send a call me back but when you try to call, the mobile will be unreachable and you can only maybe chance call them after 5 days and the response will be that it was not reachable as the young person had moved away from where he or she could access a strong mobile network before the call was processed. Sometimes they have to walk for 10 km in order to reach such a place”.

This has a negative impact on ICT based youths counselling as some young people might end up not receiving any counselling at all. This is voiced by Martilla (2011) and Jacob (2016) when they argue that sometimes technical issues arise and technology fails.

4.3.2 Curriculum for counsellors

The two counsellors who participated in the study reported that some counsellors find it difficult to adapt to technology-mediated counselling because it is not part of their training curriculum. One counsellor commented that:

“Adapting to new technologies is challenging given that at school one would have trained in traditional methods”.

The curriculum for most counselling related professions like social work and psychology is still rooted in traditional face to face counselling. When used to delivering face to face counselling, ICT based counselling becomes a challenging endeavour. Counsellors find it difficult to incorporate the therapies and theories they learnt at school with technology. This gives birth to instances of counsellor stress and burnout. This is mainly perpetuated by the absence of client nonverbal cues which aid in client assessment as stated by one of the youth participants:

“The major challenge is that with SMS we do not have real-time feedback compared to that of face to face”.

The organisation had however tried to rectify this problem by organising in-house ICT based youths counselling training for its employees with Child-line Zimbabwe who are gurus in this kind of business. The counsellors have been trained in the art of picking up mobile phone nonverbal cues such as long pauses during voice calls or instances of typing messages and deleting during response formulation on the client’s part. This aids them in making correct assessments and diagnosis on young clients.

4.4 Ethical Issues Associated With the Use of ICT in Youths Counselling

A number of counselling ethical issues were found to emerge during ICT based youth counselling.

4.4.1 Establishment of boundaries

The study found out that online counsellors have to observe strict professional boundaries in order to avoid the formation of dual relationships. In ICT based youths counselling there is danger of clients treating the counselling platforms as mere social networking. These cases are very popular on the Youth Helpline. One counsellor stated that:

“Prank calls are very common on the Youth Helpline. In addition to these, we have clients who try to personalise counsellors on the Youth Helpline and won’t accept any counselling if it is not from their chosen counsellor. This is not bad; the problem comes when they start asking for counsellors’ personal lives outside the Helpline.”

It was also observed that giving counsellor names during counselling sessions on online platforms promotes client dependency on that particular counsellor hence the creation of habitual contact. This might then lead to the creation of dual relationships which is not allowed by counselling regulatory bodies as it might lead to abuse of power by the counsellor. Creation of dual relationships might lead the counsellors in losing their practice certificates. Counsellors, therefore, have to be firm in making sure that any contact with clients on the Youth Helpline stays professional (COSCA, 2004). To further reinforce these boundaries, the Youth Helpline is never taken out of the office.

4.4.2 Confidentiality and Privacy

Findings of this research showed that the issue of privacy and confidentiality is a very sensitive issue in ICT based



youths counselling. Confidentiality is based upon the basic right of the client, it is an ethical obligation of the counsellor and is necessary for effective delivery of counselling services. One of the youth participants stated that:

“How safe is the data that I provide on these messaging platforms. I would rather use voice calls than risk having my messages exposed to everyone.”

Most clients are concerned with the safety of their data. This is due to the fact that with the click of a few buttons, an expert in technology can access data stored on computer servers. There is a high risk of third parties accessing data from counselling sessions during messaging especially on Facebook and SMS. On SMS the third party may be an employee who works at a mobile network providing company such as Econet, Netone or Telecel. Facebook is well known for its susceptibility to hackers. Youths also have the tendency of exchanging online passwords with associates, for example, current lovers which might lead in the exposure of their private lives if they separate ways. WhatsApp, however, seems to be safe as it offers end to end data encryption thus preventing any third party from accessing shared information. Furthermore, WhatsApp shows clients' profile pictures thus there is no complete anonymity. However one of the counsellors stated that that:

“Anonymity of the youth accessing counselling services is our main priority”.

Measures such as data server encryption have been put in place. In addition, the office which houses the Youth Helpline cannot be accessed by anyone who is not from that office. This ensures that client data is kept safe from prying eyes. However, this is in contrast to Jacobs (2016) who argued that ICT based counselling does not force a client to reveal their age or name during the counselling session thus there is an avoidance of treating clients as mere cases, not individuals.

4.4.3 Informed consent

The study revealed that the issue of informed consent is also key in ICT based youths counselling. It was observed that it is difficult for counsellors to seek permission from parents or guardians to hold counsel for children who are under the age of 16 years who cannot consent on their own since nowadays children may own cell phones. The counsellors reported that it was possible for young people to access counselling without the knowledge of their parents or guardians. It may, therefore, be difficult for counsellors to provide effective services or refer the clients for further help.

4.4.4 Effectiveness of ICT based youths counselling

It was found that ICT based counselling is effective for youths as it addresses the service gap in most residential areas. One counsellor stated that: *“Our society lacks physical structures for psychosocial support”*

This statement depicts the inaccessibility of counselling centres in society. This is due to the imbalance between the few resources available and the large client base. For example, the local Department of Social Services might have a large catchment area ranging up to 15 different suburbs whilst it only has at most 5 counsellors. This means that not every youth who wants counselling will access it due to these constraints. ICT based youths counselling thus steps in to cover this gap.

The frequency of accessing ICT based youths counselling may also be used as a measure for effectiveness. The study showed that 61% of the participants confessed to using ICT based youths counselling frequently. This was supported by one respondent who stated that:

“The support group offers me hope when there is no hope in the comfort of my home”

ICT based youth counselling proves to be really effective for youths who need peer support for example youths with disabilities or young people living with HIV. The ICT based support groups offer them a haven where they can access help without facing stigma and discrimination. Cuez and Allen (1999) argue that one of the goals of counselling is to offer help which is non-judgemental and to erase the damage caused by societal stigma. ICT based youths counselling through its support group is able to achieve this goal. One of the youths also echoed that:

“I use the Helpline whenever I need help”

Whilst another said:

“They should continue offering ICT counselling because it really helps some of us and it also gives us solutions to our problems”

These responses show that ICT based counselling is proving to be really helpful to youths hence the continued service uptake. ICT based counselling is taking the face of a friend who can be accessed at any time by youths.

The study revealed that 74% of the respondents do not feel the need for further face to face counselling after accessing ICT based youths counselling thus showing that ICT based youths counselling is very effective in rendering youths counselling. The remaining 26% who stated that they needed further face to face intervention represent the youths whose cases will be so complex that there will be a need for physical contact with the counsellor.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study has shown that ICT based counselling is very effective for youths who need counselling services. This is because we are living in a technologically advanced world and youths are keen to embrace anything that is technology related. It was revealed that the use of technology-mediated counselling is very convenient for youths who are keen on anonymity and live on a tight economic budget. The infusion



of technology and counselling has proven that the instrumental theory of technology is relevant to modern-day counselling. Technology knows no boundaries as it can be twisted to fit into any existing phenomenon. However, technology also fails because of issues such as network problems and reliance on electricity thus posing a threat to ICT based youths counselling. Counsellor incompetence due to inadequate training is also a threat to ICT based counselling hence the need for the introduction of modules based on technology intermediated counselling. However, it is important to note that the use of ICT based counselling does not mean phasing out face to face counselling. Face to face counselling is very important as it is able to address some complex issues that ICT mediated counselling may fail to deal with.

5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in line with the study findings:

- There is a need for software developers to create platforms specifically meant for counselling and organisations which offer ICT based counselling to adopt these platforms rather than relying on social media platforms so as to establish maintenance of ethical professional boundaries.
- There is a need for counsellors' professional bodies to establish ethical standards specifically meant for ICT based youths counselling so as to protect both the rights of the clients and those of the counsellors.

It is essential for the counsellors' education curriculum to include modules on technology-mediated counselling so as to ensure counsellor competency and maximum service delivery to clients.

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